

12 Characteristics of an Effective Teacher

“Inspirational Stories of Teachers Who Inspired Others to
Become Teachers”

A Longitudinal Retrospective Qualitative Quasi-Research Study of In-Service and Pre-Service
Teachers’ Opinions of the Characteristics of an Effective Teacher

by
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Over his collegiate teaching career, the researcher has engaged college students in discussions and writing assignments pertaining to the outstanding characteristics of their most effective teacher. Effective was defined as that teacher who made the most significant impact on their lives. Students identified similar qualities among highly effective teachers. Based on those recurring themes, the researcher has concluded that there are at least 12 clear characteristics of being an effective teacher. These 12 characteristics consistently affect students in positive ways.

These findings are the result of a longitudinal retrospective qualitative quasi-research study of what college students, majoring in Education, in-service teachers (those currently teaching and working on an advanced degree), and pre-service teachers (those not currently teaching, and working on their bachelor’s degree or alternative master’s degree), said were the qualities of their most memorable teacher who encouraged them to become teachers.

The undergraduate students (pre-service teachers), in the study, were working to earn their bachelor’s degree in teaching and were not actually teaching at the time that they wrote their essays. Most of the graduate students, (in-service teachers) were already in the teaching profession and had returned to school to obtain an advance degree in Education.

Participants of the Study:

For fifteen years the researcher taught in colleges of Education, preparing students (undergraduates and graduates) for careers in the teaching profession. During that 15 year period, he taught at seven institutions: Mobile College, Oakwood College, Calhoun Community College, Alabama A&M University, The University of Memphis, Trenholm State Technical College, and Alabama State University.

This study consisted of traditional and nontraditional students. Traditional students were defined as, students living in the dorm and having their tuition paid by their parents or by way of student loans. Nontraditional students were defined as those who were living off campus, going to school, working, and in many cases; raising a family.

Demographics of the Study:

The participants of this study were students enrolled in the various courses taught by the researcher during the fifteen years of the study. Some of the courses were taught during the day, while others were taught at night. Those courses were: Methods of Teaching Science, Methods of Teaching Math, Method of Teaching Social Studies, Curriculum Development, Child Development, Introduction to Special Education, Problems in the Elementary School, Educational Technology, and Teaching in the Urban Setting.

These courses were taught at two private colleges, three public universities, a junior college, and a technical college. They were taught at predominately white institutions and at historically black institutions. More than 1,000 students matriculated through the researcher's undergraduate and graduate classes from across the United States, Canada, Bermuda, the Caribbean, and even a few students from Africa.

These multiplicity of educational courses over the years resulted in a diverse student population: young and old, black and white, Hispanic, those of Asian nationality, males and females. Some had a disability. Some were gifted.

The participants in this study were: Early Childhood majors, training to teach grades nursery to third grade (N-3), Elementary Education majors, training to teach kindergarten to sixth grade (K-6) or Secondary Education majors, training to teach seventh to twelfth grade (7-12).

The undergraduate students were working to earn their bachelor's degree in teaching. The graduate students were returning to earn their Master's Degree in Education, and some, their Specialist Degree. There were also students who were working on an Alternative Master's Degree. These were students who had obtained their bachelor's degree in another field, such as: Social Work, Psychology, Math, or Biology and had, after completing their bachelor's degree, decided they wanted to become a teacher. Some of the Alternative Master's degree students were in the process of a career change. They had worked in another profession and had decided they now wanted to be a teacher. At the time of writing their essay, some of these Alternative Master's degree students were already teaching using an emergency certificate.

Definition of Terms:

Effective - the teacher who was most successful in helping students to learn.

Characteristics – the special personal qualities of the teacher that enabled them to become a successful educator.

Research Instrument:

While teaching at various institutions, each semester, the researcher asked students to write an essay on their most memorable teacher. They were asked to describe the one educator who had the greatest impact on their lives, was successful (effective) in teaching them the subject matter, was the teacher they most wanted to emulate, and was the individual who had the greatest impact on their decision to become a teacher.

The participants in this study were also asked to explain why they selected this particular teacher by giving a personal example of how that teacher inspired them. In addition, students were asked to discuss some of the special personal qualities (characteristics) of the teacher and to cite some specific examples of how the teacher displayed those personal qualities.

Data Analysis:

Over the years, students described their favorite and most memorable teacher using terms of endearment, such as:

“She was always prepared.”

“He was very positive.”

“She had high expectation for me.”

“She was the most creative teacher I have ever had!”

“He was so fair!”

“I liked her personal touch.”

“I felt that I was a part of the class.”

“She showed me compassion when my mother died.”

“He was so funny!”

“She taught her class in a fun way.”

“I was never bored in his class.”

“He gave all the students respect and never embarrassed us in front of the class.”

“She did not hold what I did against me.”

“He was the first teacher I had that admitted that he made a mistake.

“She apologized to me.”

Semester-after-semester, and year-after-year, the researcher began to see a common theme in students’ essays and in class discussions of what makes a good teacher. It became evident that students were referring to the personal qualities (qualitative) of their most memorable teacher and not their academic qualification (quantitative). There was no talk about where the teacher attended school or what degree the teacher held, or whether the teacher had been awarded the “Teacher of the Year” at the school. The students only wrote and talked about the nurturing and caring qualities of the teacher who inspired them, and the relationship they had with that teacher.

Undergraduate and graduate education majors were asked to write about the most influential teacher in their lives—the one teacher that had the greatest impact on their decision to become a teacher. These students were also asked, “Who was the one teacher that you would most like to emulate,” and explain why?

Throughout the 15 years, the researcher listened to students during class discussions share stories about their most memorable teacher. He read their compositions and kept copies of their essays as qualitative data. Hearing students speak about their most memorable teachers and reading their essays convinced the author of this study that if teachers are to properly educate children, they must first build a relationship with them. Children learn best from teachers who care about them.

The essays students wrote regarding their most effective teacher demonstrated several personality traits prevalent in their favorite and most memorable teacher. Those personality traits were: (1) The teacher came to class prepared, (2) The teacher had a positive attitude about being a teacher and about her/his students, (3) The teacher had high expectation for all students, (4) The teacher was very creative in how she/he taught the class, (5) The teacher was fair in how she/he treated students and in grading, (6) The teacher displayed a personal touch with her/his students and was approachable, (7) The teacher developed a sense of belonging in the classroom; Students felt welcomed and comfortable in the classroom, (8) The teacher was able to admit mistakes when she/he made an error, (9) The teacher had a sense of humor, (10) The teacher gave respect to students and did not deliberately embarrass them, (11) The teacher was forgiving, and did not hold grudges, and (12) The teacher displayed compassion and students felt that the teacher was genuinely concerned about their problems and could relate to them.

This longitudinal retrospective qualitative quasi-research study of in-service and pre-service teachers’ opinions regarding the characteristics of an effective teacher, was based on essays written by students majoring in education. As these students wrote about their most memorable teacher, a pattern emerged that led the researcher to conclude that there are 12 identifiable personal and professional characteristics of an Effective Teacher: (1) Prepared, (2) Positive, (3)

High Expectations, (4) Creative, (5) Fair, (6) Personal Touch, (7) Develops a Sense of Belonging, (8) Admits Mistakes, (9) Sense of Humor, (10) Gives Respect to Students, (11) Forgiving, and (12) Compassionate.

Significance of the Study:

The findings of this study were taken from student written essays on the topic of their most effective teacher. Students also read their essays and discuss their most memorable teacher in class. Additionally, they shared their opinions about being an effective teacher in class discussions.

College students, majoring in Education, identified 12 Characteristics of being an Effective Teacher and in turn committed to being effective teachers themselves. Children currently in grades K-12 who are fortunate enough to be in the classroom of a teacher, who displays a majority of the 12 Characteristics of an Effective Teacher, will truly benefit from being instructed by such an educator.



About the author:

Dr. Robert J. Walker is Chair of the Department of Education at Southwest Tennessee Community College, Memphis, TN. This study, including more than 100 of the best students' essays, has been published in a reader friendly inspirational book: ***12 Characteristics of an Effective Teacher*** ISBN: 978-1-4357-1528-8 (pages 144, paperback, \$15.00). This study was also published in *Educational Horizon* (Vol. 87, No. 1, Fall 2008).

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